



● By Jason Blake

MARILYN

THE SECRET OF HER SUCCESS

Few performers have been blessed with the ability to deliver a line, strike a look, render a song, or turn in a performance in a way that etches it indelibly in the pop culture psyche and the annals of film history simultaneously. Marilyn Monroe was one of them.

"She had a luminous quality that was pure magic," recalled cinematographer Jack Cardiff in his 1996 autobiography, *Magic Hour*. Working behind the camera on *The Prince and the Showgirl*, directed by and starring Laurence Olivier ("the greatest actor alive" according to critic Kenneth Tynan), Cardiff had the opportunity to watch Monroe more closely than most.

Despite Monroe's amateurish inability to hit her marks, her fluffed lines and failure to match takes, the great lensman was hugely impressed by her talent. "She had something that came out," wrote Cardiff. "She looked like a child and paradoxically she was terribly sexy. She had the thing that I suppose all men think about: a girl who wants protecting, plus the obvious sex appeal."

That appeal has overwhelmed her reputation as an actress but for all her natural attributes, Marilyn Monroe worked hard at her craft, and trained at Lee Strasberg's Actors Studio in New York. He went on to acknowledge her as one of the two greatest talents he had ever been associated with.

However, to those who were on a film set with Marilyn Monroe, her talent was often less tangible. Veteran actress Sybil Thorndike said: "You watch her act in a scene, and it seems nothing - too vague and underplayed: but when you see her on the screen, it's just wonderful."

"What she had was more than personality," recalled actor Don Murray to author Richard Buskin in his book *Blonde Heat - The Sizzling Screen Career of Marilyn Monroe*. "That's what makes stars, whereas an excellent screen actress is someone who can be very honest and very real and full of emotion in very, very short spurts. That's all that is required. Based on what I saw, I think Marilyn was aware of the process, but I don't think she was aware of the results. During the making of *Bus Stop*, everyone who worked on it - especially those of us with stage experience - were constantly saying, 'My god, how are they going to cut it together to get a performance?'



Sizzling up the screen.

Then, when the first preview took place, we were all stunned. We couldn't believe how good Marilyn was. That's when all of us stage people came to realise that the screen medium is a totally different animal. Consistency didn't seem to mean a damn thing, especially when you were a star and they had patience to do a lot of takes and cut together the pieces."

Between 1947 and 1961, Marilyn Monroe's acting career encompassed melodrama, crime drama, comedy and musicals and she was directed by some of Hollywood's finest directors, men like Billy Wilder, John Huston, George Cukor, Otto Preminger, Howard Hawks and Fritz Lang. Working alongside Clark Gable, Bette Davis, Charles Laughton, Joseph Cotton, Robert Mitchum, Eli Wallach, Montgomery Clift, Cary Grant, Jack Lemmon, Tony Curtis and Lauren Bacall - the biggest names of the time - Marilyn not only held her own but in several notable instances outshone her co-stars. "Marilyn could be marvelously funny and very moving at the same time,"

George Cukor once said. "This is a very rare thing... She was pretty, but much more than that, her face moved beautifully, which is very important for an actress. A lot of them have lovely faces which don't move with beauty... She was truly unique."

A select group of actors can be wonderful in a bad film, others are invariably lousy in a good one. Marilyn was somewhere in between, her performances often matching the standard of material. She would rise to the heights of a great movie and sometimes sink to the depths of a bad one, but as George Cukor noted, she was always totally watchable: "Marilyn had that unique quality that makes a great star: the quality of excitement she generated. Something happened when she came on the screen, even in a long shot where she merely walked across a scene at the farthest distance from the camera. Your eyes couldn't help focusing on her. Just that walk across the screen generated excitement when it was Marilyn."

The Marilyn Monroe Box Set - Volume 1 (Don't Bother To Knock, How To Marry A Millionaire, The Seven Year Itch, The Misfits), Volume 2 (Monkey Business, Niagara, Gentleman Prefer Blondes, There's No Business Like Show Business) and Volume 3 (River of No Return, Bus Stop, Some Like It Hot, Let's Make Love) are available now.